論　文

現行の小学校英語教育を評価する

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Assessing Current English Education in Japanese Elementary Schools

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Abstract

本研究では、現行の小学校英語教育の手法の有効性について、文部科学省の目的、Cameron (2003) による理論的アプローチ、中学校英語教育への連携の有効性という三つの視点から考察した。現行制度が文科省の目的を概ね達成していることが明らかになった一方、Cameronアプローチとの乖離、学習者の小中連携への準備不足が原因となり、現行の英語教育の有効性に関して懸念が生じている。小中連携とそのための準備に一層の注意を向けることを提案する。

Key Words : English education, young learners, elementary English, secondary English, transition in education

Ⅰ. Introduction

Since the announcement of the 2020 Tokyo Olympics, the Japanese government has been using this event as a motivation to 'rejuvenate Japanese society and its people' and stimulate the general public to catch up with the globalizing world (MEXT, 2013). Successfully familiarizing citizens with the global language of English is a key component of Japan's plan to ensure that the nation is connected with the rest of the world, and the primary method to develop the citizens' English ability is through public education (Gaynor, 2014). Therefore, Japan is implementing an English education reform at the elementary school level alongside the 2020 Games (MEXT, 2014). However, in order for the system to successfully be reformed, it is crucial to first examine the effectiveness of the current system and assess its flaws. This paper discusses the effectiveness of the current elementary English education. In section 2, an overview of elementary school English education in Japan is provided to focus on how skills are taught. It is then thoroughly examined in section 3 through three perspectives: the Ministry's objective, a theoretical approach, and values of transferability into junior high school English education. I find that elementary English education succeeds in some aspects and fails in others, and the last section provides insights to how the upcoming reform can prosper in regard to the three perspectives examined.

Ⅱ. English education in Japanese elementary schools

English was first introduced into elementary fifth and sixth grade classrooms nationwide as a compulsory part of the curriculum under the title of 'foreign language studies' in 2011. Some schools may have offered English before 2011 and/or towards lower grades, but that depended on the boards of education of the districts, meaning many schools and teachers had never dealt with English education until 2011 (Rixon, 2013). These weekly non-subject periods (45 minutes each) were treated with a lower priority than the three core tested subjects of Japanese, math and science (Gaynor 2014). Students are taught by either: 1. their homeroom teacher (HRT) alone who usually majored in education of other subjects and had received minimal training in teaching English during their university education, or 2. a team-teaching pair of the homeroom teacher plus an assistant language teacher (ALT) who is usually a

native-speaker and usually holds no formal teaching qualifications. In the latter situation, while the HRT should legally be the leading teacher, the responsibilities are often wholly given to the largely untrained ALT (Benesse Educational Research and Development Centre 2010, as cited in Gaynor, 2014) for reasons such as: the HRTs do not know how to effectively team-teach with the native-speakers (Tajino & Walker, 1998), the planning process with ALTs is very time-consuming (Sakui, 2004), the HRTs are too occupied and pressed with other subjects and duties as approximately 40% of teachers expressed that they do not have the necessary time to plan their English lessons (Benesse Educational Research and Development Centre 2008, as cited in Gaynor 2014), and the HRTs simply do not want to teach English (Gaynor, 2014).

Teaching approach and materials?

Since the compulsory curriculum came from the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology, or MEXT, the textbooks *Hi, Friends! 1* and *Hi, Friends! 2* by the Ministry are adopted and provided to all students along with other textbooks used in elementary school. The schools also have the liberty to choose and purchase other published materials with their own budget, with the *Hi, Friends!* textbooks provided nonetheless (Rixon, 2013). Regardless of which published material was chosen, teachers in Japan tend to follow the selected course books and teacher's manual very closely (Gaynor, 2014).

The official *Hi, Friends!* textbooks take a theme-based approach. The theme-based approach requires a high level of knowledge and lingual expertise from teachers to help the lessons go beyond course books and make them more practical (Cameron, 2001, p.182), so to help the HRTs untrained in English teaching, the themes in the textbooks are simple and relatable, and the materials provide an array of easily comprehensible activities. Teachers can pick and choose certain activities to assemble a 45-minute lesson that would captivate students or simply follow the standard guide given in the teacher's manual.

As with many textbooks where the themes are structured to contain a grammatical or functional sequencing (Cameron, 2001, p. 184), the *Hi, Friends!* textbooks follow the same tactic. The activities included in the books often cover a range of non-language skills, and teachers (HRTs and ALTs) are encouraged to venture beyond the given activities to supplement the lessons. Thus, lessons typically include elements of other subjects such as art (drawing), math (often surveys), social studies (foreign cultures), and music (chants and songs). These activities appear to offer a 'whole-language experience' that values the overall educational and social development of students without limiting the lesson to only be about English (Vale and Feunteun 1995, as cited in Cameron, 2001), aligned with the fun and experience-based communicative approach of the Ministry of Education (MEXT, 2011).

Teaching oral skills

Elementary English education in Japan is largely focused on speaking and listening skills. Based on the ministry-published *Hi, Friends!* textbooks, the main activity of each unit tends to require students to produce English orally, such as conducting a survey about favourite colours, interviewing their classmates about their daily schedule, making a self-introduction with illustrations, or even re-enacting the Japanese folktale: Momotaro. Students also often practice discourse by songs and chants. However, it is crucial to note that the results of the students' discourse are very limited due to the topics and target language taught. Their results, as expected, consist of only very straightforward question-answer pairs without the ability to extend or continue into a conversation.

As for listening, both *Hi, Friends!* textbooks come with software that play recordings of

instructions, keywords , target language and chants. This inclusion reduces a tremendous amount of stress from the HRTs, who are often not confident in their own English speaking abilities. The audio files from the software consist only of very simple language resembling the target language for students to replicate. Another major source of listening practice comes from the ALTs who generally conduct the classes primarily in English. As a result, students get exposure to English beyond the target language in the textbooks as they try to comprehend and react to English instructions, classroom language or other speeches. On the downside, the untrained ALTs might not understand how to adjust their language to be level-appropriate for students. It often leads into some HRTs seeing their responsibility in the classroom to be translating the ALTs' instructions for students to understand, when such language demands should be left to the students (Cameron, 2001, p. 24). These tendencies would deny the students of precious English listening opportunities.

Teaching literacy skills

Regarding the teaching of reading and writing skills, the Ministry of Education appears to have placed a very low priority on them as evident by the lack of reading and writing activities in *Hi, Friends!*. There is virtually no reading in the books besides the unit titles and the very few words (and alphabetical characters in the relative chapters). Even the unit's target vocabulary is shown with illustrations only, unless individual schools decide to purchase the supplementary flashcards with English words displayed from, available from other publishers. There is also essentially no requirement for students to write in English, as virtually all activities in the textbooks can be completed by either connecting dots, checking boxes, or answering in Japanese. This is intriguing since all third and fourth grade students learn how to read and write the Roman alphabet in Japanese class. It further demonstrates the particularly low standard the Ministry puts on the literacy skills in English classes, and instead focus is placed on oral skills.

Ⅲ. Assessing the effectiveness of Japanese elementary English education

Unlike the core subjects, English is not a tested subject in Japanese elementary schools. The Ministry has yet to set goals of the level of competence that students must achieve by the end of the two years, so there are no officially established objectives to help determine the elementary education's effectiveness in regard to learners' English skills. Instead, to evaluate the current Japanese elementary English education, we must review it from different angles. We shall discuss the effectiveness of the current education through three perspectives: 1. how it accomplishes the goals set by the Ministry of Education, 2. how it matches academic research, namely the theoretical approach for young learners proposed by Cameron (2003), and 3. how it transitions into the next stage of English education in junior high school.

Goals set by the Ministry of Education

The following passage is the overall objective of 'Foreign Language Activity' as laid out in *The Course of Study for Elementary Schools*, released by the Ministry of Education:

> 'To form the foundation of pupils' communication abilities through foreign languages while developing the understanding of languages and cultures through various experiences, fostering a positive attitude toward communication, and familiarizing pupils with the sounds and basic expressions of foreign languages.' (MEXT, 2011)

By adapting the theme-based approach, students indeed develop their English not only

through language instructions, but with various experiences such as music, math and art. The positive attitude comes with the low-stress and fun-activity-centric style that these classes have, as 73.3% of sixth grade students who liked English classes answered in a study stating the main reason being that the classes are fun (Benesse Educational Research and Development Centre, 2011). Familiarizing pupils with sounds and basic expressions might be a vague and subjective goal, but it does not seem unreasonable for higher-grade elementary students to effectively achieve within two years. *Hi, Friends!* appears to have made extra effort in its design to keep the target language relatively simple at the elementary level, such as using only 'I' and 'you' as pronouns so verbs never need to be conjugated. However, this 'make it easy to avoid burdening students' principle has also drawn criticisms as to why such a low-demand goal focused on attitude rather than the actual language learning is appropriate for 11 and 12 year-old children, while other subjects require and expect much higher cognitive -demands (Gaynor, 2014). Nonetheless, the current approach seems to satisfy the objective set by the Ministry.

Theoretical approach by Cameron (2003)

In the highly influential article by Lynne Cameron (2003), she discusses challenges that the ELT field faces from the expanding TEYL (teaching English to young learners) field and then summarized two key features of child foreign language learning that demand special attention. We can discuss the appropriateness of Japan's elementary English education by comparing its approach with Cameron's model.

Cameron (2003) proposes two key features unique to children acquiring a foreign language: 1. Children's learning is communication first, used with meanings and for actions, and 2. Children rely on oral language for a very considerable amount of time before they can take on written language. For the former point, we do see the units of the textbooks laid out with communication heavily in mind. The themes surround language items closely related to students' everyday life, thus students instantly have common topics to communicate about with the newly acquired language. Activities will also allow students to interact with English through various actions.

Regarding the latter point, elementary English education in Japan does heavily prioritize oral language over written language, as demonstrated earlier. As Cameron (2003) suggests, young learners are much more efficient in dealing with oral language because it is something we have all been doing since we were born, whereas a focus on the written aspect of English, which has an extremely high demand of cognitive and motor skills, could very likely create a 'literacy skills lag' so that the oral components have to be put aside to cope with such demands. Therefore, the current approach does appear to be aligned with both key features suggested by Cameron. However, she also suggests that literacy skills, which are introduced at the junior high school level, should first be developed through talk. Giving students only two years of weekly lessons to handle rather basic target language for the focus shifts away from oral skills, we must question if the oral skills students acquire in elementary schools are sufficient for moving onto the next level.

Value of transferability into junior high school

Finally, it is worth discussing the transferrable values of the elementary English education from the perspective of how it assists learners in the transition into Japanese junior high school English education. With English officially starting from fifth grade, Japan is one of the later countries to introduce English education (Rixon, 2013). This also means that many students only have two years of English education before entering junior high school. While the

elementary education appears to accomplish the Ministry's goals while being aligned with expert opinions, the transition is where issues occur.

The first issue comes with the fact that elementary English is not assessed, and with many teachers not officially trained in teaching English and English classes often deprioritized in favour of other core subjects, learners leave elementary school with varying levels of English acquired (Yano 2011, as cited in Gaynor, 2014). Combined with the fact that around 36% of sixth grade elementary students attends private institutions for English lessons, the gap in ability is even wider (Rixon, 2013). Teachers at the junior high school level rarely get to meet with the elementary teachers to discuss the transition, so they have very limited knowledge of the work done in elementary English classes (Rixon, 2013). Thus, the learners are often treated as absolute beginners upon entering junior high school, regardless of their acquired English knowledge (Rixon, 2013). This poses many problems. If students in junior high school are learning the exact same language that they feel they have successfully acquired in elementary schools already, they may find it to be boring or a waste of time (Cameron, 2003). Not only were the years practicing the language wasted, the developed positive attitude would also be spoiled.

Motivation is likely to be damaged from the other end as well. Japanese elementary English education takes a communicative approach for students to develop a positive attitude towards learning the language, but the reality is that English education in junior high school is significantly different. English in junior high school is a tested core subject with about 4 lessons per week (50 minutes each), quadrupling the amount at the elementary level. Writing and reading are not only introduced, but also heavily stressed in order to prepare students for the grammar-focused and receptive-skills-centric exams. In fact, even when teachers want to incorporate more communicative elements into the lessons, speaking often has to take a backseat for literacy practice to meet the demands for exams (Sakui, 2004). ALTs who used to lead elementary classes also take a side-role as 'human tape recorders', so the Japanese teachers of English can focus on teaching the language itself over communication. A recent nation-wide survey shows that 31.7% of junior high school English teachers of first year students use less than 30% of English in class, including 5.8% using virtually none, and the situation worsens with the higher grades with 41.1% of third year teachers using less than 30% of English in class, including 9.7% using virtually none (Benesse Educational Research and Development Centre, 2014). The same survey also shows that 43.9% of junior high school students feel that they are having difficulties with English, including 14.8% who responded experiencing 'a lot of difficulties' (Benesse Educational Research and Development Centre, 2014).

With the massive gap of the teaching methods between the two levels, students would develop a positive attitude towards the fun and interactive English lessons in elementary school during the two years. However, they are then suddenly tossed into an extremely pressured style of English learning that is completely different from what they became familiar with. Students are demotivated when they find the lessons too difficult as well (Cameron, 2003), and this can come from either the level of content, the unfamiliar way of learning, or both. Surveys show that while 73.3% of sixth grade elementary students like English because 'it is fun', only 48.7% of first year junior high school students answered 'fun' as a motivation to learn English. Instead, 82.4% of them answered 'to get high scores on tests and exams' (Benesse Educational Research and Development Centre, 2011). One may argue that the motivation of test scores from junior high school act as a replacement for the motivation of fun from elementary school. However, some experts suggest that learners with a positive attitude towards the language will learn it more effectively (Ushida, 2005), and research has shown that when students are required to meet some extrinsic requirements such

as tests, their intrinsic motivations are naturally undermined (Dornyei, 2008).

While the current elementary English education appear to accomplish certain goals, the massive and sudden gap in teaching methods and a lack of smooth transition between elementary and junior high schools result in wasted knowledge as well as demotivated students from either being too challenged or not challenged enough by the lessons. From that, we can conclude that the elementary English education contains little value in terms of aiding students to transition into junior high school English education.

Ⅳ. Implications and conclusion

From the discussion, we can see areas where the current elementary English education succeeds in, namely in achieving the objective set by the Ministry of Education while being aligned with key expert suggestions for teaching English to young learners. However, we also observe areas where the system fails. We might also question if the Ministry's objective was appropriate and whether the short period of two years is enough to build up students' oral skills in the beginning stages of their overall English education. The biggest concern comes when we look at Japan's English education as a bigger picture and consider the lack of values in elementary English education in transitioning to junior high school English education.

Regarding the issue with the objective appropriateness and the limited elementary education, the good news is that Japan is preparing for an English education reform that will be fully implemented nationwide by 2020 (MEXT, 2014). This plan of reform will introduce English from third grade in elementary schools, increasing the years of English education to four years in elementary. In addition, English periods for fifth and sixth grade will triple to three lessons per week, and they will be conducted by 'class teachers with good English skills' and 'specialized course teachers' who are licensed Japanese teachers specializing in English education. The objective for the third and fourth grade is to 'nurture communication skills' and 'nurture basic English language skills' for fifth and sixth grade, implying earlier introduction of literacy skills before junior high school. Although there is still not a clear objective or method of evaluation to standardize students' level of English before entering junior high schools, having an expertized and trained teacher in elementary school that can hopefully communicate with junior high school teachers will definitely smoothen the transition process out. Students will be more equipped and prepared to face the leap into junior high school English education, specifically when it comes to learning literacy skills.

While Japan prepares for the reform in elementary English education, it also raises the important question as to whether the junior high school English education requires the same attention for a simultaneous reform. However, Gaynor (2014) has pointed out that improving the current young learners programme in elementary schools will require a significant amount of time, funds, and political movements. As we can see, Japan has already accumulated the sources needed to take action, and Gaynor also suggests that success in implementing a comprehensive elementary English programme will necessitate a reform in the junior high school and then naturally the high school level. Thus, this may be considered the first step to revolutionizing English education in Japan as a whole. With a more successful transition between levels, this reform will hopefully help ensure that the English education students experience in elementary schools will be more valued, so Japanese students will find support from their earlier experiences as young learners of English as they further their education as an English learner.

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